On display: wall-to-wall learning

Kirstie Andrew-Power from the **Specialist Schools and Academies Trust** and **Charlotte Gormley** from **The Compton School** show how putting display on the school agenda can support the ethos of the school, teaching, learning and achievement. They model examples to help schools do this in a variety of creative ways

At school, only the quality of teacher is a greater determinant of student success than the environment. Environments can be nourishing or toxic, supportive or draining. Environments are never neutral ... (Jensen, 2003)

The current educational agenda identifies learner wellbeing as the key determinant in achievement and outcome. How the learning environment is designed can have a huge impact on wellbeing. One particular aspect that has a powerful influence on this environment is the use of display space. Managed well, it can create a climate where students feel valued, nurtured and can achieve beyond their potential.

Ethos on display

Display should transcend simple physical appearance. Successful and meaningful display reflects the ethos of a school, and an exciting, learning-focused environment makes for excited learners. An environment that mirrors respect and care makes learners feel cared for and respected by the place in which they learn. This positively impacts on how well students learn, how happy they are as they learn and the respect and care with which they treat their school; the same applies to staff.

The signs we use around our schools and the messages that signage and display deliver are key to a learning-focused climate and they reinforce a school's ethos. If we care about our school environment and our classrooms, it shows we care about our students, our colleagues and our schools. This impression is quickly passed to parents and visitors to the school.

Using plenary ball

There are hundreds of suppliers of display materials and there are reference books that focus on information and communications technology in classrooms. The one reference and support material specifically for schoolteachers is Eric Jensen's *Environments for learning* (Jensen, 2003), quoted from at the start of this article. However, there are no references or resources for school leaders and secondary schools, so here we aim to provide challenge, motivation and inspiration for colleagues in taking this agenda to the next level in their schools, with practical ideas and strategies for action.

Managed well, display can create a climate where students feel valued, nurtured and can achieve beyond their potential

Using digital display

Using flatscreens as a tool for the learning environment is becoming increasingly popular in schools. Positive images and statements on a rolling display in entrance halls, dining rooms and around a school promote the school ethos and reinforces key messages to staff, students and visitors. We have seen a number of examples where flatscreens are used to inform staff and students with notices. These notices are interspersed with positive images of smiling, hard-working students and other statements. In one school, the previous year's GCSE results appear throughout notices, with statements such as: 'Year 11 are going to do even better!', 'Year 11, imagine how you are going to be feeling on results day' and 'Our best Year 11 ever learn in our classrooms today!'

A number of schools we work with have found that the initial cost of the flatscreens has been far outweighed by the positive impact these have had on the school environment. One school displays positive messages of encouragement to students entering the halls on exam day, another school has flatscreens in the students' social area and displays last-minute revision tips when providing hot breakfasts to students on revision and exam days. Both these schools take digital photographs at every event or trip and ensure these are displayed on the days following the event, reinforcing the learning messages from trips and the achievement focus of the events. In these schools, non-teaching staff have responsibility for managing the flatscreen displays; in another school, a GCSE photography group is responsible for updating and managing them.

Under workforce agreements, in the context of teacher workload, display is one of the identified tasks that teachers are told not to undertake. Our experience in schools is that developing display for learning may require a culture shift for senior leaders and colleagues or teams across the school; for some schools it will require significant change processes. The challenge is to recognise the significance of environment on achievement, and balance awareness and development of this without imposition on teacher workload.

First steps

Some schools wanting to take this agenda forward have begun by asking the following questions:

- What do we observe when we first walk into our school?
- What do we observe when we first walk into a classroom?
- What do our first impressions tell us about the climate and ethos of our school?

Further questions have arisen from these and we found ourselves working with staff and students to agree where we wanted to be with ethos, climate and environment and how we were going to get there. For us and for the schools we were working with, placing display alongside and as an integral part of school improvement priorities was key. The case example in the box on pages 30–31 shows how a huge variety of display types can be used in this way at many different levels,

For a number of schools we have worked with, there is a fear in the early stages of development that white walls will invite graffiti and quality displays will be damaged or ruined by disrespectful students. Being realistic about the current climate of the school and planning strategies over the short, medium and longer term are key to creating a safe, learning-focused and respectful ethos; where there is effective leadership managing this change process, anything is possible. It is possible to start with motivated and enthusiastic staff and then make a commitment through time and resource for staff development, dissemination of practice and effective use of meeting time. The corollary of this is a movement towards a consensus with teachers and support staff on responsibility for display. Using students as a valuable resource can provide quick results that are often more compelling to direct action.

Example of learning styles display

Where schools have made a long-term commitment to developing environment for learning, display and ethos are embedded in self-evaluation, through strategic development and are integral to teaching and learning

Example of washing line display

Power of student voice

A number of schools we work with engage students in auditing signage across the school site, agreeing where signs are needed, what these need to say and which need to be in student-friendly language or visitor-friendly language. In a number of schools, this includes writing signs in a variety of different languages, with students being given the important role as translators. Our work with these groups involved discussions about the power of positive language in serving the school ethos. We worked with students and staff in considering the difference between, for example, litter bins displaying: 'We respect our environment and put litter in the bin' or the more common: 'Put litter in the bin.' The first speaks volumes about inclusivity, shared common ethos, mutual respect and ownership of behavioural expectations. 'Put litter in the bin' assumes exclusive staff ownership, denotes lack of respect and a 'done to' approach. Student leadership of the changes in sign language and use has had quick and significant impact in the schools we have worked with – this has been particularly powerful where changes have been accompanied by student-led assemblies and lesson activities distributing leadership and ownership across the student (and staff) population.

In another school, the senior leadership team had written ethos statements about the school: 'Put learning first', 'Respect yourself and others', 'Respect your environment' and 'Support others.'

After working with a student and staff group – the statements were changed to: 'We put learning first', 'we respect ourselves and others' 'We respect our environment', and 'We support everyone in our school.' This led to changes in the language used in home-school contracts, school rules and regulations, and in the day-to-day language of the school. A powerful factor for change here was the students' leadership role.

One school's audit revealed negative signs in all staff areas: 'No pupils allowed here', 'Do not enter, staff only', 'Staff-only chairs' and so on. The wider issue was that students did not have access to the support they needed during break and lunchtimes when they had forgotten dinner money, wanted to hand in homework, or had a question for a teacher. Working with staff, the students set up a pupil-support-team table in the reception area, where queries and questions could be addressed. Learning mentors were also at the support desk during breaks and lunchtimes and reception staff worked in rotation to pass on relevant messages to students, parents or teachers. The student group worked across form classes, sharing their findings from the audit and the solutions they had found. The group went into assemblies so that the messages were clear. The signs were replaced with advertising for the pupil support team. Staff reported that they

Student leadership of the changes in sign language and use has had quick and significant impact in the schools we have worked with

Case example: The Compton School, Barnet, North London

Display for learning has been a priority at this school for the past four years and the examples below demonstrate how the school uses display to support whole-school focus areas.

Achievement boards

Each term every department decides on eight to 12 students who have achieved particularly well in the term – in all spheres of school life. Departmental meeting time is used to agree the names of the students and write a statement about their achievement. These are passed to one of the resources officers, who locates and prints off the student's photograph from the central management file. The statements are typed up and mounted with the photograph in a different colour for each department. The photographs and statements are displayed on achievement boards across the school for all students, staff and visitors to read – see the photograph at the bottom of page 33 for an example.

Staff across the school (teaching and non-teaching) contribute to developing the achievement boards and ownership lies with staff. Selected student names are circulated so that departments can ensure different students are selected at different points through the school year and that the foci for success varies. This ensures that a significant majority of students appear on the board throughout the year and counters negative responses from students; pupils of all year groups universally welcome the boards. The positive achievement ethos of the school is reinforced and validated by both the process and the displays.

The display is highly motivational for students who strive to be included and staff across the school refer to and celebrate their inclusion on the boards. It provides feedback for all students about areas for improvement and reinforces the ethos that everyone can achieve their best. For example: 'Omar improved his written work in English last term by reading five books during the summer holiday. This has helped him improve his spelling and vocabulary.' This is a useful example of display for learning – encouraging and motivating students through recognition.

For staff, these displays are quick, easy and eye-catching – it encourages staff to change their displays termly by placing display on the termly agenda. This also provides a different perspective on achievement – if a student has done well in one subject and is not doing so well in another area, expectations of that student can be altered and student expectations of themselves can be altered by making comparisons against success. These displays also link to end-of-term celebration evenings.

Assessment for learning display

'Learning objectives' and 'learning outcomes' are laminated A4 sheets in every classroom (see the photograph top right on page 34 for an example). Students are familiar with these in every room and seek them out at the start of each lesson. The sheets are moveable, so can be tacked to the small whiteboards in every room or to the interactive whiteboard – students become familiar with the words and are also aware of the aims and outcomes of every lesson. Using students as a scribe is also an effective way of involving students in this initial activity and allows for the language used to be student-friendly.

Accelerated learning display

A red cross and green tick are displayed on the wall to remind students of the purpose of the small whiteboard that the school has placed in every student planner (see the photograph at the top of page 34 for an example) . Students can write a red cross or green tick on their personal whiteboard to discreetly demonstrate their understanding of a task – also useful in ensuring calm at the start of a task. The red crosses and green ticks on personal whiteboards can be used for plenary tasks, such as true or false statements, learning recap and so on.

The signs we use around our schools and the messages that signage and display deliver are key to a learning-focused climate and they reinforce a school's ethos

Learning styles display

The learning styles display builds on the work carried out with students about understanding what type of learner they are and their target development areas – see the photograph bottom left on page 29. Cards attached to displays with Velcro pads allow students to interact with the resource. In this case, students are encouraged to understand different learning styles, understand that they may have a dominant learning style and have to work on developing their range of working methods. The interactive display

were no longer disturbed during their important breaks and lunchtimes; students felt they had a place to go when they needed support and also that the process had raised how important it was to think through solutions whenever faced with challenge. Learning mentors and the reception staff felt included in the day-to-day management of the school and enjoyed working closely in developing students' independence and solution-seeking skills.

One school worked with groups of students across the year groups, collecting quotes and images that reflected the school's ethos. Each form presented 10 quotes and images with a statement about why each one reflected the school ethos. For example, a Year 7

Seating plan display

allows staff to reinforce these messages by asking students to identify the learning style required for the task set and, using Velcro pads, remove cards from the display to use at their desks – also providing movement time. This also encourages staff to include a variety of tasks suitable for different learners. This method is particularly powerful used with classes revising for exams – visual learners benefit from using mind maps.

Plenary ball

The plenary ball (see the photograph at the top of page 28 for an example) can be bought from a range of school stockists and has questions inside it, such as 'what information did I learn?' and 'how did my learning meet the lesson objective?' This encourages a range of students with varying abilities; feedback from students at The Compton School indicates it is particularly boy-friendly.

Level descriptor board

It is difficult to display all necessary information on one board in text that is large enough for students to see how they can move from one level to the next. Using Velcro pads makes the board interactive and meaningful, allowing students to remove the relevant cards from the board and spend time identifying key skills that they need to include in their next piece of work – see the photograph at the bottom of page 34 for an example.

This is also a useful extension task. In departments where level descriptors change, depending on the topic taught, colleagues can change the level descriptor cards for each topic without having to reback and reborder the display.

Washing line

Using the washing line is an effective way to display up-to-date student work and keywords associated with a particular topic – see the photograph top left on page 29 for an example. It is quick and easy, can be changed according to the topic, it is eye-catching and frequently referred to by students.

Emotional-intelligence board

Emotional-intelligence board displays model whole-school developments in emotional intelligence by celebrating students who have successfully used emotional intelligence when faced with challenge. Boards displaying photographs are immediately noticed and this is a powerful reinforcement of the benefits of an emotionally intelligent response – see the photograph at the bottom of page 34 for an example. It can motivate disaffected students and those who strive to be included.

Positive statements on classroom door

Positive statements on classroom door encourages students to recognise that they are entering a learning zone and sets the tone for a lesson. For example, 'welcome to science: prepare to be challenged'.

We work with other schools who have adopted this through the school and above the entrance – one school changes its learning-focused display fortnightly to tie in with the learning theme of the school. For example: 'we learn together' is the theme of the cycle, with students learning how paired and small groupwork benefits learning. This is reinforced through lesson activities, plenaries, assemblies, discussions on the web and a visiting workshop on positive peer relationships.

Another school displays the GCSE results from the previous year with statements challenging the current Year 11 to improve on these. One school we visited has the percentage of five or more A*–C GCSEs displayed in every corridor, on every classroom door and in classrooms throughout the school, as a celebration of achievement.

Seating plans

Displaying positive statements written by students about why seating plans are important reinforces the whole-school expectation for seating plans in each lesson. This also supports classroom management and makes lessons start promptly and calmly – see the photograph above for an example.

Displaying positive statements written by students about why seating plans are important reinforces the whole-school expectation for seating plans in each lesson

group provided: 'There is no "I" in team' by Tony Adams, ex-captain of Arsenal Football Club. Their explanation showed how Arsenal were led to success by Tony Adams and, by working together with other students, the staff and your parents, you were never on your own, always had support and help and could learn from and with each other. This reflected the school's ethos for this group of students. These were framed cheaply and displayed across the school, including in the toilets.

Where visuals are positioned on the wall can make a difference to how they impact on the student

A whole-school approach

In one school, colourful walls and displays were a feature of phase one of the school improvement plan. Three years on, students and staff have now opted for white walls in all classrooms and corridors, with display and photographs bringing colour. Signs throughout the school are positive, well placed and limited to what the student group felt were necessary.

Bright visuals that focus on learning are a feature of all classroom doors, but classroom displays still follow the guidelines agreed by staff in year one of the plan (a list of similar ideas appears in the box below on tips for display for learning). A significant change in year three is that all staffroom displays have been removed to create a clear, clean relaxing space for staff. There is a sea theme to the pictures and the walls are pale blue. Notices, the coverboard and pigeonholes are all housed away from the staffroom. This creates a different atmosphere to the stimulating vibrancy of the classrooms and the calmer learning- and achievement-focused displays in the corridors. Staff report a significant impact on the way they feel after breaks and lunchtimes and this has had a positive impact on the quality of learning in their lessons.

Top tips for display for learning

- Completely strip the board of the previous display. However tempting it is to cover over previous displays to save time, old staples and bits of card will start to poke through – start afresh.
- Use complementary colours, back the board with a bright colour and try to use a colour wheel to select opposite colours to mount the work on. Present students with an array of colours as soon as they enter the room.
- Back resources twice, use two shades of coloured card and ensure the border is an equal width around the outside. This may seem unnecessary and time-consuming but the finished result is well worth it. When this is a feature of display across the school you will notice the difference and the display will last longer.
- Avoid beige and white card where possible and use bright, inspiring colours to excite your students. Black can make for a dramatic and effective background if display placed on it is double mounted.
- Keep it simple and do not crowd the board – one picture can speak a thousand words.
- Try to create an interesting border. There are good quality borders available in the shops but, as an alternative, copy repeat images or words and put these around the outside of the display. Simple images are great for visual learners who will associate the symbol with the topic as a way of remembering. For example, copy a country's flag many times to make a borders, use a simple image such as a football, a flower, a key word or a photograph.
- Try to use grids and charts, where possible, to present information. Be daring and overlap images, allow images to spill on to the walls so that the frame is not restrictive.
- Ensure titles and key words are written in font size 72 or above, for easy viewing. Students need to be able to read what is there with ease and can explore the body text when they are given the time to do so. Ask your students which font styles they find most inspiring and easy to read and have a look at existing displays around school to see which work best for you.
- Vary the way information is presented around the room. Buying push-out letters to use as well as printed titles offers variety and interest. Have a look at what is available in the shops.
- Try to include displays with a three-dimensional element – students are drawn to boards with items they can touch and it is important to not be too precious about these. Students are respectful of an environment that shows they are cared about and respected.
- Do not forget the ceilings or the space between your head and it. It is simple, quick and cheap to string things from it – images, words, pictures and sequences.
- Cover corridor boards with plastic to maintain their quality and encourage using the classroom displays as interactive tools for learning by using Velcro pads. This is simple yet effective – level descriptors can be peeled from the displays and taken to desks, pictures and images can be peeled from a display and used as a starter or discussion tool.
- Try to make space in classrooms for temporary exhibitions. These can support the learning of a specific topic and are a powerful learning aid for kinesthetic and all other learners.
- Audit the signs in your school and work with students on this. Do they reflect your ethos? Can they become motivational and contribute to your positive ethos? Can they be inclusive?
- All schools have staff (teaching and support) who have a flare for display and it will not be just teachers from art or technology departments. Using your school's version of the television programme Changing Rooms for a staff meeting or Inset day can refresh displays across the school and use the talent of key colleagues and students.
- Overcome the workload issues surrounding the term 'display' by referring to it as 'learning resources.' This allows staff to embrace interactive and stimulus material as an important feature of quality learning experiences.

A number of schools we work with have found that the initial cost of the flatscreens has been far outweighed by the positive impact these have had on the school environment

Assessment for learning display

Some schools have made good use of digital display – details of how this can be used to good effect are in the box on page 28.

Tidiness

Visual clutter inhibits learning. Studies suggest that disorganised or cluttered learning environments can impair cognition. Such environments cause the eye to dwell on a scene for significantly long periods in an effort to make sense of the chaos – a task that requires substantial cognitive energy detracts from meaningful learning time. (Vecera et al, 2001)

Student audits of the school environment are consistent in revealing that students link messy classrooms with disorganised teachers and negative learning experiences. The box top left on tidy classrooms is adapted from Vecera et al's work and gives quick results.

Can plants improve learning?

This section shares the work of Jensen referred to earlier and has provided evidence for schools and teachers keen to plan house and outdoor planting into their work on the environment.

Plants can raise indoor oxygen levels by 10%. Putting several plants around the room not only tells students you care about their working environment but also produces 'negative' air; despite its label, negative air is desirable. Human activity destroys negative ions and ultimately reduces the amount of oxygen in the air. Smoke, dust, smog and other pollutants contribute to this and, as a result, the air becomes too highly electrified and is counter-productive to learning. When the charge in the air is too positive we can feel groggy and lethargic.

The fresh and energising feeling we have from rainfall or standing by a waterfall are the benefits of negative air. A stuffy classroom with too much positive air will negatively impact on learning. There is high negative air in environments with running water, wind or plants, so for classrooms, open the window if it feels stuffy and choose plants best for producing negative air. These are palms, rubber plants, English ivy, ferns and spider plants. Making plant care a student responsibility can prove highly motivational for some pupils.

Where to place display

This section builds on the work of Vecera et al (2001) and has been used with student groups and teaching staff across a number of the schools we work with. In a number of cases, this has supported work with developing student and staff understanding of learning styles.

Students link messy classrooms with disorganised teachers and negative learning experiences

Making plant care a student responsibility can prove highly motivational for some students

Keeping a tidy classroom

- Assign students to support with classroom maintenance – straightening desks, picking up papers, and pushing in chairs. Build this in to the end of every lesson before the plenary, then students have a clutter-free environment to recap on their learning.
- Ensure classroom equipment that is not being used is stored in boxes away from the front of the classroom.
- Store classroom essentials, such as pens, paper and so on, in drawers and cupboards. Aim to have the teacher's desk as free as possible.
- At least half-termly, take an honest stock of your classroom, discard materials not being used, change key words and remove students' work.
- Consider building classroom tidiness into the observation cycle to raise its profile and importance as a whole-school approach.

Where visuals are positioned on the wall can make a difference to how they impact on the student. The direction your eyes look indicates an access to certain physiological modes, such as visual, auditory and kinesthetic. This refers to the findings of Dunn (1983, 1984) and Reinert (1976), and the wealth of associated research that has demonstrated that learners have these basic perceptual learning channels:

- visual – reading, studying charts, mind maps and so on
- auditory – preference to listening
- kinesthetic and tactile – preference for experiential learning with physical involvement, 'hands-on' learning, such as building and doing.

Regardless of a student's preferred learning style, all research indicates that the front of the classroom is best kept simple, neat and uncluttered. Vecera et al (2001) state that display placed at eye level evokes good feelings – frequently, students who feel they are failing lower their eyes, so display that makes them feel valued, important and able to achieve can

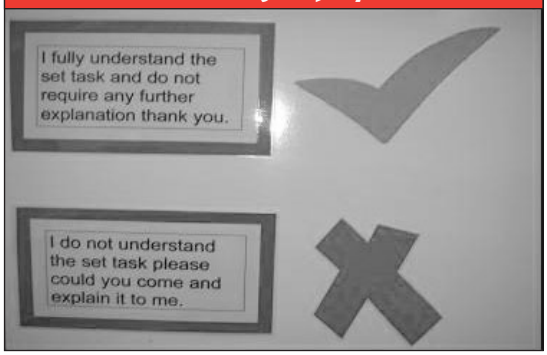
Example of an achievement board display

have a positive impact. Celebrating achievement boards should be placed at eye level for higher impact as all staff and students will have this frequent hit. Display at this level also invites discussion and this can promote discussion on achievement as a feature of the school. Display placed above eye level can be stored and recalled by students, so displays of key words, key facts and information should be placed here; washing lines (see the case example box on pages 30–31) are a useful tool for this.

Display tips

The list of top tips for display for learning, shown in the box on page 32, was inspired by one that we saw in the *Guardian*, written by Phillip Beadle (Beadle, 2005) and shares ideas across a range of schools. It reflects work in schools where display for learning has been given a priority in the school improvement plan and has been backed by resources and time – for some schools this requires change and a shift in culture. Staff and student engagement with the process, staff development, provision of time and resources are required. Whole-school change, with enthusiastic staff engagement, needs longer-term planning; the examples we have drawn on in this article show change over a two- to three-year period.

Accelerated learning display



Use of level descriptor board

Example of using display to enhance emotional intelligence

Long-term benefits

Many of the examples we have shared through this article produce quick wins and short-term gains for developing the quality and impact of display and signage in classrooms and around schools.

Display communicates the ethos and climate of a school and has a powerful role in supporting and developing mutually respectful, engaged and achievement-focused students and staff. The impact of this improves relationships, improves the quality of the learning experience and improves achievement.

Put simply: where schools have made a long-term commitment to developing environment for learning, display and ethos are embedded in self-evaluation, through strategic development and are integral to teaching and learning. In these schools, students and staff are valued, respected and nurtured; students achieve in an environment where they are safe and cared for and achievement is maximised.

> *A commitment to the school environment through wall and digital display, use of signs, welcomes on classroom doors and at the entrance are crucial to reinforce the ethos of the school. The impact of these displays go far beyond just filling a space. This is key to personalising the learning experience for students. Quality display around school reinforces messages that a school is about success and achievement, quality classroom display gives students a scaffold for their own thinking; students use it as a resource and a tool for reflection – this empowers students to articulate, understand and have ownership over their learning.* Maria Cachia, Achievement Networks Coordinator, SSAT

Kirstie Andrew-Power, Achievement Networks, SSAT, leads the National Campaign for Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement, and Charlotte Gormley, Senior Leader, The Compton School, with responsibility for inclusion and pastoral care and a lead practitioner for equality and inclusion at the SSAT.

Both authors have been pivotal in developments with positive behaviours for learning and display for learning and have written publications on equality and inclusion, boys achievement, positive behaviours for learning, environments for learning and engaging parents in raising achievement. Kirstie was previously a senior leader in two secondary schools.

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